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ABSTRACT

The primary responsibility of the communication internship is to provide the opportunity for students to apply classroom learning on the job with academic and the professional guidance. An examination of the internship programs at two universities (university "A" and "B") demonstrates how such programs can become ineffective. Through poor planning, organization, and supervision, all too often interns are treated like new employees doing only one job with minimal, if any, on-site training and supervision, and not enough to justify the academic credits to be earned. If a college or university department of communication, media studies, or broadcasting desires to create an effective internship program that can meet the needs of the student, the university and industry working together must provide the following: (1) the work experience must be real and established by contract; (2) guidance, direction, and support must be provided to the student to insure an educational and professional experience; (3) the internship must be structured to insure a learning experience worthy of the academic credit awarded; and (4) a student counselor/advisor must be appointed to instruct, supervise, and visit the intern on the job to evaluate the experience and to act as an intermediary between the intern, the work supervisor, and the sponsoring company. (KEH)

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# Professional Internships: The Use of a Valuable Learning Experience

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Abstract

This work examines the role and function of the communication internship. It examines two programs in terms of their goals, methods and procedures in placing, directing or supervising students placed into internships. This field experience is an important part of the education of communication students.

The primary responsibility of the college or university is to educate, and the internship is to provide the opportunity for students to apply classroom learning on the job with the guidance of the academic and professional.

# Professional Internships: The Use of a Valuable Learning Experience

Professional communication curricula have three basic goals: first, preparation for entry level positions in the industry; second, providing the opportunity to meet the requirements of top level management positions in the broadcast, cable, or industrial video industry (Tarbox, 1983, p. 20); and third, development of academic skills to insure that studies may be pursued at the graduate level. It is becoming increasingly important for the college or university program to include a "professional internship experience," to aid in meeting these objectives.

The importance of an internship for media students has been expressed by educators both in the liberal arts and professionally oriented curricula and has been routinely required in many bachelor degree programs. The significance of a good intern program goes merely beyond another pre-professional qualification but can play an important function in the student's education.

> In fact, some interns reported that they modified their academic studies because their experience [in the field] made them realize certain theories were more important than they had thought previously . . . . The internship makes interns more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, including their own potential for various kinds of work . . . . [They] develop practical skills in an environment that quickly evaluates their worth, and the experience makes interns more desirable as they enter the job market (Downs, Harper and Hunt, 1976, p. 277).

Field experience has value for the development of professional attitudes and helps in any decision making relevant to the choice of a career. This is more significant in the traditional academic program than in the professionally oriented curriculum where the pre-professional and laboratory experiences are emphasized, but it is important for both.

Simulation can only go so far. ". . . many of these [internships] amount to gofer work, but even then students will experience the pressures and time demands

of professional broadcasting and will be exposed to a professional attitude and atmosphere" (Dugas, 1984, p. 22).

Media executives place a significant value on the importance of student internship experience as a plus for prospective employees. "Broadcast . . . educators might want to stress the development of appropriate skills through extensive writing, reporting and production opportunities both in and out of class. Internships with commercial stations and relationships with campus media should be improved and broadened" (Wulfemeyer, 1983, p. 9). "Actual or simulated commercial . . . experience (internships or campus [cable TV channels and] radio stations) prepares the students more adequately . . . . The primary ingredient for entry level success is clearly practical radio (TV/cable) experience" (Parcells and Hadwiger, 1984, p. 13). In an article on the paid commercial internship, the value of this experience is expressed as the factor on the resume that sets apart the few thousands from all the graduates of communications programs (McCleneghan, 1985, p. 19).

The feelings and opinions cited have, in many cases, led to the indiscriminate placement of students in internship positions, which at the most provide a few college credits and a resume entry.

This paper examines the use of the internship program in two universities as an educational as well as a pre-professional experience for media students. Both institutions expressed the idea that they were excellent learning experiences. The rationale for these programs is based on the fact that corporate and entry level managers routinely seek individuals who have some practical field experience and are able to fit into a variety of entry level positions in their companies.

University "A" required each media student to complete a six credit internship for graduation. In this program the student was responsible to discover, arrange and secure department approval. The rationale for this was that it provided students with valuable job hunting experience and it stressed that it was the student who was ultimately responsible for the success of his or her career.

The approval procedure was performed simply by an exchange of "paper" forms between the student, university and the sponsoring organization. There was no direct contact between the university/department or the media firm, with the exception of information explaining the reporting procedures they would be required to submit at pre-determined intervals. The department noted that one faculty on-site visit. This formality was omitted when the student was in a distant out-of-state location.

When assisting with the visits in University "A", I found a student in a marketing internship with a small company. Her primary function was as a full-time paid employee whose duties ranged from secretarial work in the office to actual labor in the company's shop cleaning automobiles. The marketing function was an overload and secondary to the job requirements, and solely on the student's initiative and expertise. The student found herself in the situation of having to meet the department's internship requirement and the responsibility of obtaining the position on her own. The department's approval of the internship position

was granted because this was her last requirement for completion of the degree program. The student received academic credit and a resume entry of a "marketing internship" but with a minimum of practical experience. Neither the company nor the university provided any guidance or assistance during this internship.

This was not an isolated case; there were other students in this program who were in similar circumstances. Some did not get media experience even though they did obtain positions in media organizations [many were merely gofer internships] because the department did not exert any direct control or supervision over the internship. The pressure to complete a mandatory requirement for graduation often forced students to accept almost anything at any expense. The student's evaluation and semester grade was determined by the faculty rating the student's performance on the basis of written reports filed with the department by both the sponsor and the student. The internship program at University "B" was more organized and under regular, direct supervision of the department faculty, unlike Program "A". This program was

structured to specific media companies with identified internships specializing in news (writing and production), studio work, field experience, etc. The internships were approved by the faculty only after meeting with the perspective media firms. In this program students applied to the department which made the arrangements for the various internships. Students were screened for specific positions and each employer had a list of students that would be applying for the position.

The internships were arranged in three levels--beginning, intermediate and advanced, each with a respective number of credits (e.g., 1, 2, 3 or more). To qualify for the intermediate and advanced internships, the student had to meet a minimum grade point average of "B" in the major. The determination of credit value was done on the same basis as it was for courses. Evaluation/grading was a continual process of measuring the student's performance and the ability to accomplish tasks assigned by regular observation and meetings. Both the sponsoring professional and the faculty member worked together to

determine the student's grade, which was based upon performance in relation to the job descriptions/ criteria established for each position.

Students could also request the department to accept an internship that they discovered. The acceptance process was the same as previously noted.

Discussion

In both internship situations similar problems existed. The primary problem was one of university control over the quality of the internship experience. In Program "A", where the students were responsible for obtaining their own internship and having it approved (it was a graduation requirement and a culminating experience), the department found it difficult to deny approval because the written request usually met the institution's requirements including specifying the detailed functions, responsibilities and role of the intern. In reality the experience was often far from what was described.

The flaws in this approach were lack of direct contact with the cooperating media firm, minimum control over the role of the intern, and absence of

supervision or guidance. Once the student was approved and in place, there were only written contacts with the department as required at regularly pre-determined intervals. Often, if not most of the time, these reports were filed late or after the semester had concluded. If any modification in an intern experience was to take place it could only be done the following semester. Therefore, once in place the intern was on his own. Even grading was done by only evaluating the student's and field supervisor's written reports and grade recommendation. The on-site visitation played no part in the determination of grade or function of the internship in general. The visiting faculty member was instructed that the purpose of the on-site visit was purely a public relations function. This suggests that the grading was at best superficial if not questionable.

A major problem with this program was the inadequate support for its operation by the university. The faculty administered the program as an overload function to their regular responsibilities. There is no substitute for a full-time staff dedicated to the

management of an educational program. For this program to provide a real "learning by doing" experience, it must be under the tutelage of both the academic and professional. This demands structure, organization and regular supervision to assure intellectual and professional content. The very organization (or lack of) and structure of this program raises a question as to its credibility. The underlying philosophy of the program was simply that it was a valuable experience because students were in the professional world. There was no attempt to develop a cognitive relationship between the student's academic and field experience through any instructional activity.

There is a significant ethical question or issue which becomes evident in this type of program and that is, what is the institution's obligation to provide students with the internship experience they were led to expect and paid for?

A similar staffing problem existed in University "B" where administration of the intern program was also an overload assignment. However, this internship program had a well-defined structure and was organized

to maximize the value of the work experience, but it became ineffective at times due to the lack of time available for the staff to administer it.

Both programs lost effectiveness because the staff responsible for them did not or could not provide adequate supervision, and intellectual as well as hands-on experience. Program "B" was somewhat more effective in achieving desirable results because of its design, organization and operating structure. However, all too often interns are treated like new employees doing one job with only minimal, if any, on-site training and supervision, and not enough to justify the academic credits to be earned.

The difference in the breakdown in the effectiveness of this program was because the academic staff used most of their time attempting to correct or solve the problem-laden internships while the well-functioning ones were given far less attention than they should have. Often instructional aspects of the program were lost because the problem-solving pre-empted them. The major difficulty that occurred in this situation was that students were often at the

mercy of their host supervisors. The typical complaints were too much observation with too little hands-on experience or just the opposite so that they had difficulty in fulfilling their course requirements. When investigated, many of these were found to be justified.

The academic institutions must develop and maintain some type of procedure with adequate and qualified personnel to supervise all off-campus work. This is an essential element that cannot be ignored or treated lightly. While not all internships will be or are expected to be equal, they should meet minimum standards providing an opportunity for professional and intellectual development.

The programs need a feedback system to facilitate solving of problems of the field supervisors and interns. Otherwise, the information is after the fact; that is, after the internship has been completed and credits have been awarded. In some of these instances, students may be fulfilling a meaningful requirement with a meaningless experience.

To strengthen or improve the internship programs, much attention and effort must be made to rectify the problems in the work experiences and provide "quality learning by doing" opportunities.

In an article, "Interns: The Ivory Tower at Work," the authors, John M. Hyre and Alfred W. Owens, in describing their internship program state:

> Our most basic tenet is to maintain very tight control of all facets of the internship program. This control is important for several reasons: first, we want the student to receive the best experience and education possible; second, we want to minimize the chance for mistakes to occur, continue, and cause serious problems; third, we want those organizations that contribute time and energy to our students to have confidence in us and what we are trying to do; and fourth, control contributes to our reputation (1984, p. 371).

The two programs that have been discussed hardly attain these objectives, at least purposely. The successes occurred because of the desire of the students to succeed and the dedication of faculty who

spent time and effort to help the students have a meaningful field experience.

These programs allow for serious abuses such as easy or even unearned academic credit, free or cheap labor, and allowing the host company to exploit those eager to become members of the profession. For example, in some instances students have been led on with a promise of employment when it was known that this was impossible or only a remote possibility. The university or college has a responsibility to protect or at least inform their students of the reality or probability of such employment, as well as providing them with a positive learning environment.

The university or college also has an ethical responsibility to protect students' right to grades (evaluations) based upon set standards of performance. This can only be effectively achieved if the internship is clearly defined for the sponsoring organizations and students. If this is done, fewer difficulties will arise over what is expected and demanded of the interns in each position in the same way as a professional's contract or company policy spells out one's duties,

responsibilities and rights as well as general policies and procedures.

Students should know what the actual internship experience is to be. They should be given specific job descriptions with duties and obligations, as well as the criteria employed for student evaluation/grading. The host company should also be made aware of the expectations of the institution as to what specific work experiences the students will have. Then, by the use of an ongoing (formal or informal) evaluation process such as announced and unannounced site visitations, meetings and seminars with the interns away from the job site as a means of providing a feedback channel to voice problems and concerns, this technique is a valuable instrument to bring together the classroom, laboratory and professional experience to complete the educational program. It cannot just be assumed that students are getting a valuable high quality off-campus program.

Some institutions will only place students as interns whose grade point average is "B" or higher. The purpose is to insure that competent students will

be placed with media organizations, so that the institution's or department's reputation will be enhanced by providing highly successful interns. This concept or practice should trouble the educator because of the present professional climate where the professional work experience may be the key to success in obtaining media employment. "Average" students who are ineligible for the internship program may be the students who would benefit the most and excel in the work experience. This exclusion from the pre-professional/educational opportunity could make a difference of success or failure in their academic and professional careers. To compensate, students not meeting the grade point standards often create their own unofficial internships. These students are left without the aid or support of their department. This educational policy of placing only above average students would seem to merit study.

When the grade requirement is in place, grade inflation can easily result to insure enough students to justify the program or make it work, thereby creating a "Catch 22" situation. This raises an

important question, should the requirements/standards for graduation from a college or university be lower than those for acceptance into an internship program?

The grade point average in the major is not an accurate predictor of the student's ability to be successful professionally. A better or more accurate means to approve internship applications would be to use a method comparable to the job reference process. This combined with an interview could help the internship director select and place interns into positions that would encourage learning and skill development, maximize success, and eliminate as much as possible the unsuitable internship where neither the employer nor the student benefits. This would yield positive results for the media department in terms of credibility and placement of their graduates in full-time positions. Using this procedure could also realize additional positions for their students, since employers who have a good experience with students often seek additional interns and assign them more responsibilities.

A contract should be negotiated with the sponsoring company that would set all conditions of student internship placement, including such items as number of hours to be worked per credit, paid versus non-paid, and under what circumstances and conditions students would be considered for future employment. It should also set all the mechanisms for evaluation of students during visitations and evaluation of the internships by the students. If a sponsoring firm would not be willing to enter into this type of contract, one should seriously question the reasons why they would want interns.

"The university should try to match the student with the organization that caters to the student's interest and the university needs to be familiar with the organizations that are having interns and aid those organizations in planning a program for the intern" (Down, et al., 1976, p. 282).

It is also important to speak directly with those who will be directly involved in the internship program in order to discover their particular requirements, needs, hours, problems, attitudes

> and expectations. A full discussion of these matters aids in avoiding future difficulties and will elicit a favorable commitment on the part of the organization to a serious and well intended internship program (Hyre and Owens, 1984, p. 371).

This concept is employed in the Brigham Young program as an informal contract for what the intern's duties will be. "The academic department provides a sample agreement. Prior to participation, the ramifications of the internship are pointed out by the faculty internship advisor. Students are held accountable for their performance" (Mouritsen, 1986, p. 28). This informal contract informs both the student and the sponsoring organization about the role and function of the intern placed with them.

The value of any internship is directly related to the quality of the experience. The student has the right to expect that his "professional work" as an intern will be a high quality and valuable learning opportunity, not just a resume entry and college credits. While observing and being in a professional work site is beneficial, it does not necessarily make

one a professional. The concept that any experience is good or sufficient is inadequate to guarantee quality of learning. The educator should not accept the "gofer" internship but should provide a quality work experience that has a direct relationship to classroom activities. This is essential for the professional development of students. The inherent value of just being in a professional work place observing or doing minimal related work should be questioned. While these situations do allow for experience, they do not necessarily allow an individual to further his or her skills in the field unless there is a program designed to provide "learning" through guidance by both the academic and the professional. Even when a student is involved in a substantive or solid work experience, there still should be an interrelationship between the classroom and laboratory.

If internships are to provide valuable educational and vocational insights, they should be employed early in the educational program rather than used as a culminating experience. A work site program tailored to the student's ability, needs and course work

background should be employed as part of the curriculum where theory, laboratory and field experience are an integrated triumvirate. They should not be treated as unrelated, separate educational experiences. The unifying and interrelating of experiences is a sound pedagogical practice.

It is the institution's and department's ethical obligation to insure as much as possible that this "professional work" is meaningful to the student's development. In order to achieve this, academic institutions need to know firsthand through on-site visitations and by contractual agreement what interns will be doing or allowed to do during the internship. It is irresponsible for a college or university to leave interns at the mercy of the host media firms.

A major concern of the internship program both for the school and the student is the awarding of grades. The apprehension often expressed by the academic is that grades received by interns are too high, that few ever do poorly in the internship. Students, on the other hand, realize that to acquire high grades in an internship program means a greater chance of getting

that first job and also lifting up a sagging academic record. The primary reasoning is that low grades will significantly lessen their chances of success in job hunting.

If the professional internship experience is valuable, letter grades are not essential. Credit towards graduation could be granted on a pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. The student's performance could be evaluated in a written recommendation by the field and faculty supervisors which can be put in the student's placement credentials, thereby eliminating the grade inflation problem while providing academic credit towards department and graduation requirements. This written evaluation or recommendation would be more valuable to the student since it would describe their performance for the perspective employer. Grades are often meaningless in describing learning, achievements or ability.

## Conclusions

If a college or university department of communication, media studies or broadcasting desires to

create an effective internship program that can meet the needs of the student, the university and industry working together must provide the following:

1. The work experience must be real and established by contract.

2. Guidance, direction and support must be provided to the student to insure an educational and professional experience.

3. The internship must be structured to insure a beneficial learning experience worthy of the academic credit to be awarded.

4. A student counselor/advisor must be appointed to instruct, supervise and visit the intern on the job to evaluate the experience and to act as an intermediary between the intern, the work supervisor and the sponsoring company or station.

It is very important for the student that the academic learning and work place have a complementary relationship, not separate experiences. This can be achieved using various approaches: requiring the intern to meet in a seminar session weekly, bi-weekly or in a regular class session with a university or

college internship advisor or on an individual one-on-one advisor basis. The significant point is that the relationship between the formal education and the work experience needs to be explored. One cannot assume that these relationships will be immediately or automatically seen and understood. The specific method to be employed would need to meet the requirements of the university or college.

Medical, legal and education interns are placed in an actual work situation under the direct guidance of a cooperating professional. Media interns should expect no less. This type of hands-on professionally directed experience in the media work place should be insured by both the university and the sponsoring company. Media students have the right to expect an opportunity to apply the intellectual and professional skills learned in the classroom and laboratory, as well as to experience the rigors and demands of the position in much the same way as the professional. These internships would make the education of media students a cooperative effort of both the university and the industry.

The program should allow the university to do what it can do best and let the industry provide that part of the student's preparation that cannot be done well in the academic setting, utilizing professionals to indoctrinate/professionalize the media interns into the current industry practices and procedures.

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